

THE FAIRY'S FOSTER-MOTHER,

A LEGEND OF IRELAND.

BY THE LATE JOHN L'ESTRANGE.



It is a well ascertained and duly acknowledged doctrine by the professors of fairyism, that there is nothing which the "good people" are so anxious about as the providing an earthly nurse for their offspring; and there is not, as these same gifted professors will tell you, a "knowledgeable ould woman from Wexford to Athlone, but can tell you that it is the most dangerous and unlucky thing in the world to leave a lying-in-woman or a corpse for a moment alone." How this analogy is made out the initiated alone can prove, but numerous are the stories, and most "incredibly attested," which they adduce relative to "poor women" being taken away from the arms and love of their husbands and families, and doomed to spend the remainder of their days in the gloomy caverns of the earth, treated as slaves and drudges by their captors, until their allotted time is come. What particular end is answered, in the moral and political economy of fairyland by this fostership I never could get satisfactorily explained, but the following from the lips "of sybil sage and old," is one of the many wonders in the history of fairy abductionism which may go far in proof of the general principle. I shall endeavour to give it in the peculiar and characteristic style of the narrator, that it may the better convey the turns of thought and expression with which the people clothe their belief in superstitions of this kind, and confident that it would lose much by any attempt at a translation.

"Sure, then, you know the ould Forth of Ballinderry that stands all covered with trees and bushes, about fifty perches from the town of Mullingar. It is as beautiful a spot as you could wish to sit in on a sum-

mer's day—so lonely, and wild, and green and shady—down below you lies the road to Kilbeggan, always a foot deep with dust or mud; on your right is the decent town itself, and its *colloquin* (gossiping) men and women; to your left is the sweet *Lough Innuel*, with its calm blue waters and deep hanging woods, its green islands and boggy shores, not forgetting the muddy Brosna that winds its sluggish way through moss and moor until it buries itself in the limpid waters of the Lake through which the ripple of its waves can be traced for nearly a mile on a calm day. Of all the places in Christendom for the 'good people,' that Forth of Ballinderry beats them out. Och, ochone, many a queer turn has happened in the same Forth; and well Mick Mulryan has cause to remember the same, aye, to the day that he'll close his eyes on the light of the blessed day in this wicked world. God betune us and harm! Amin! Amin!

"Now Mick himself (that's when he was young) was one of the decentest and purtiest boys in the parish, and mighty quiet to boot; for barrin' the football and the dance, and the faction fights with the long Doyles and Mullowneys, a scrimmage or two at a wake, and an odd squabble on his own account, his name was never brought up afore the Justice or his Reverence, and very fond of him the same priest was, considering a poor farming boy like him; and when his reverence would ride over to the end of the parish, not a house in the place would his horse stop at but Mick's; and who'd blame the beast, when it's a good reason he had for the same?—for it's there he'd get the genteel usage and plenty of the same, and if there was a good feed of oats to be got for love, money, or

stealing, you may be sure the priest's horse would have it. Them were the good ould times when you might make as free with your neighbour's share as your own. Och, ochone, but the world is changing; often I heard my mother say the same—the goodness be marcful to her bones in the ground—the cross about us all, and why not? Amin! Amin!

"Mick, you see, was an *olphan* (orphan) by reason of the death of his father, who left him a snug, well-stocked farm, round the hill above at *Boreen-a-Corp* (the Road of the Dead); and, by the blessed hazel stick in my hand, Mick was the boy to make the best of it, let alone his ould *collough* (hag) of a mother. Well, I knew her, *Breed rua* (red Bridget); she was the fag end of a long ancient family, and many a worthy and wealthy farmer would be right proud to accept Mick as a son-in-law; but Mick knew his own business best, and what's more natheral, seein' that there was one he loved better than the rest of the world beside, and that was Maihri M'Dermott, the poor widow's daughter. Yes, she was poor, but she was honest; and poverty was no treason in them days any how. They played in the same fields together when they were children; they sought together for the nests of the robin and the yellow-breast; they went to the same school; and Mick was always Maihri's partner in the dance. He loved her as he loved the breath of his body or the light of his eyes, and she loved him as a modest girl should love her promised husband. A sweet creature she was, with blushes like the wild rose in the hedge; lips like the ripe berries of the woodbine; and her yellow hair curling round her white neck. Och, ochone, the ould times were the times in earnest; where can you find the people now like those that are gone? The world is growing worse and worse every day. Och *wira sthrue* (oh! the sorrow it is). What will it come to at last, *furier gear* (to be regretted)?"

It were, I fear, a tiresome task to follow my old historian through all the episodes and ramifications of her tale—enough to say at once that Mick and his Maihri were married, and that the wedding was the grandest affair that could be imagined; and that the lives of the happy pair passed as a pleasant summer's day, without a single cloud to dim its brightness, until it was time to think of making preparations for a christening.

"And now comes the worst part of my story," as we again take up the thread of our tale; "for nothing would take Mick from the wish of bringing poor Maihri into Mullingar behind him on the ould mare with a nice straw *soogaun* (low seat) twisted neatly under her for a pillian. They bought the tay and the sugar for the nursetindher and the neighbours, the good whiskey and the wine for the priest, though, by my good faith, his reverence was neither backward nor behindhand when a jug of punch was singing on the table before him.

"Well, Mick and Maihri were jogging home, thinking of nothing in the wide world, when just as they came to the bridge over the stream at the cross roads, the ould mare that you'd think could hardly draw her skin and heels along with her, made a sudden snort and a bounce. 'Hoo, the sorrow go with you for an ould garron, what the puck's coming over you?' sez Mick, but the ould mare only gave another caper, and a

wheel about on the road. 'Arrah, the devil sweep you, you ould *omadhaun*' (fool), sez he, again, 'what's getting into you? Grip me hard, Maihri, *avourneen* (my darling); throw your arm about me, and I'll give her a taste of the stick. *Ha veehonie* (vagabond), take that,—and that,—and that; hold hard, Maihri, what's the matter with the ould blackguard? Its more of it she wants, there then,—and there,—and there; now will you go on? Hold hard, Maihri.'

"'Oh stop, Mick, jewel,' sez she, 'till I get down, and then you can lead her quietly over.'

"'Duoul Cush' (devil a foot), sez he, 'I wouldn't please her, the rip. I wouldn't satisfy the ould stag to let you walk an inch; just hold me tight, and devil a danger, I'll take the sulks out of her. Now get on there with you; you wont, wont you? well then, here's at you again. Keep your grip, Maihri, *agra*' (my love).

"In this way he fell to murdering the ould mare, but in spite of all he could do, she wouldn't budge an inch, but backed right into the ditch; and when she felt the thorn bushes, she kicked out like a mad thing, and squealed and reared, till at last she fairly tossed Maihri off, and Mick on top of her, into the middle of the stream; and there she was—Och! *wira eelish* (oh! the grief of heart), what sufferings poor women are born to go through—Lord lighten the burden on the overloaded! Amin! Amin!

"Mick was ravin' like a madman, when he saw his Maihri out of one faint into another. Some of the neighbours came round him, to put patience into him, and carried Maihri into the next house. The doctor was sent for in all haste, but in about half an hour after giving birth to a beautiful boy, she departed. They laid her out and waked her where she was, and a pleasant plentiful decent wake he gave her, sure enough, and a crowded funeral she had; for, as I said before, they belonged to the ould antient race all out, and they buried her below in Lynn, by the edge of the Lake—a cold spot it is to be buried, too, by the same token—no trees about it to make it comfortable; but the wind sweeps over it across the lake, and whistles and groans among the falling walls of the old church, like the shivering ghosts of the dead.

"You see, Mick couldn't abide to look the ould mare straight in the face ever after, so sould her away. He wanted to get a nurse for the child, but his mother got so fond of it, that she kept it, and said she'd manage to nurse it herself. And so she did, and a fine child it grew, and throve out o' the face. Och, ochone!—but sure miracles will never cease; the more we live the longer we know—who can tell how they are to die—many a day in the grave on us, and its well to be prepared. Lord have mercy on me, a sinner! Amin! Amin! Och, *amonum beg* (oh! my poor soul).

"In about three or four months after this *scaal-achree* (heart burning,) Mick sez to his mother, one night—'Mother, dear,' sez he, 'I intend pushing purty early for the fair of Multifarnham in the morning, to look after a baste in place of that bad luck of a devil I had. My curse, and the curse of—'

"'Don't curse Mick, *avick*' (my son), sez she, 'but let all your luck go with her.'

"'Well, I won't curse the unlucky limb of mischief,' sez he; 'but bake a cake for me, and leave it with

some milk and butter on the dresser, and I'll just break my fast afore I start, and take a trifle with me.'

" 'I will, I will, *a gra gal*' (my white love), sez she, 'and the Lord may speed you, and send you safe home, Mick, dear!'

"Now, you see, the bed in which Mick slept was in a room that looked towards the kitchen, so that when he was not asleep with his head on the bolster, he could see all about the house. His mother slept in a settle near the fire, and the child in the cradle beside her. Now Mick, being more than common uneasy in his mind this night, couldn't rest by no manner of means, but tossed and tumbled, thinking of his own Maihri. The fire upon the hearth had blazed up from the ashes which was pressed over it, and flashed about, so that he could see every thing in the house nearly as plain as if the blessed sun was shining. Suddenly the door opened, as if of its own free will; and who should he see walk in about the floor but his Maihri. His heart beat loudly against his breast; he could scarcely breathe, though his mouth was wide open; and he could do nothing but stare and gaze, and yet he did not feel as one afeard. 'It's her ghost,' thinks he, 'it's the creature's spirit, it is, that's wandering about in thribelection and sorrow; but well I know it's not to do any harm, she visits them she loved so well when she was amongst them, and who would give up their life to save hers. But may be it's not right for me to speak first, it might disturb her errand. I'll wait and see what she'll do.'

"She walked over towards the fire-place, took the Granny's *seestha* (straw chair) and seated herself beside the cradle. She then stirred and settled up the fire as natural as any living Christian, and taking up the child she put it to her breast? 'Oh! Christ Jesus,' thought Mick, 'what's this for!' The poor infant when it felt her touch crowed and nestled into her bosom like a little bird under his mother's wing, and seemed to rejoice as if it knew the kindness of the heart that beat against its little cheek. After some time she stood up, put some water into a deep wooden bason, and stripped the child quite naked. '*Curp na Chreestha*' (body of Christ), said he to himself, 'will she drown her own *paustha bra* (child for ever)? and he was ready to leap almost out of his skin with fear and wonder. But the creature never was unnatural, and dead or alive she had the tinderness to the last. She washed the child from head to foot in the water, dried it, warmed it, and put on its clothes; then she again placed it to her breast, and silently rocked it backwards and forwards till it went to sleep, and then she carefully covered it up in the cradle—and what makes the affair more wonderful, the infant never whimpered, or shed a tear. 'Och, the blessing of holy Saint Crum be about us!' thought Mick, 'but that bangs Bannagher, and Bannagher banged the devil; but the goodness of God is beyond expectation.'

"When she settled all as she found it, she stood up and went over to the dresser, where finding the bread and milk, she began to eat as ravenous as one that didn't see victuals for a year and a day. When she was going out, she gave a long mournful look up into the room where Mick was lying, and gave a sigh from her very heart's core enough to break a heart of

stone. Och the Lord may send light to all souls in darkness! for we are ordered to pray for the enemy as well as the friend. *Sha dha vaha vera na thalawntha na grashtha*, &c. (Hail, Mary, full of grace, &c.); Och, Amin! Amin! oh!

"You might take your oath on the height of yourself of Testaments and Bibles that Mick didn't sleep much more that night, so got up brave and early, and the very first beggarman or woman that came to the door, he gave them the remainder of the bread and milk.

" 'Ah, then, Mickie, *vich machree* (son of my heart),' sez the mother, 'I thought you were in Mulfarnham by this time.'

" 'I was thinking so myself,' sez Mickie, 'but I was thinking after that I'd do without a beast for a while longer;' and observing the ould woman turning her beads, 'had you not best,' sez he, 'say a *Pater* and *Ave* for the rest of poor Maihri's soul,' sez he; 'that's if your're not too much taken up with your own concerns!'

" 'Why, then, bad luck to my soul,' sez she, 'if ever I miss that same, night and morning, on my two knees.'

"The next night Mick stopped awake, on purpose to see if she would appear to him again; and true as the blessed sun, about the very same hour, she made her appearance as visible as before, opened the door, came in, went to the fire, took up the child, washed and dressed it, hushed it to sleep in her bosom, and laid it in the cradle. She then turned to the dresser, but, as there was nothing left for her to eat, she went away very mournful. 'Faix, there must be something in this beyond my comprehension,' sez Mick; 'but I'll soon untwist the turnings of it, if there's knowledge in the parish; and if all fails me, I'll try father Fatterill; the Lord save us from harm! sure I think he'd do as much for me as any other poor boy in the barony.' He rose early in the morning without telling any person about the trouble that was like a fire in his heart; he turned his face and his feet towards the cabin of *Shuawn na mona* (Judith of the bog), the fairy woman. She lived alone in a moss-covered cabin, in the wild bog of Lynn. Many a bad story is told concerning doings with the good people, and many an ill turn laid at her door, now that she's dead, by those that may be would not say it to her face, if she was alive to contradict them, or put the blast on them, or the lameness, or the blindness; and sure we're ordered not to speak ill of the dead,—if we can't do them a good turn, let us not do them a bad one, for

'Many a could day
We owe to the clay,'

and not one of them paid yet. Lord straighten the path for the poor sinner! Amin! Amin! sweet *Breedth na thinna** (Bridget of the fire).

"However, they said she knew more than she ought, or than what was good for her soul. Mickie stopped as he drew near to the cabin door, for he thought he heard the old woman talking to some person inside, and sez he to himself—'I'll not go in yet, for may be I'd only disturb the company.' He waited some time, but seeing no person come out, he ven-

* The ever-burning shrine of St. Bridget, Kildare.

tured nearer to the door. 'You're welcome, Mick Mulryan,' sez she inside; 'kick the dust from your pumps and cross my threshold.' Mick took off his brogues and carried them inside in his hand. 'Its not for nothing that you darken the sunbeams in my doorway this morning, and only that it is the son of your father that stands under my roof, you should turn your back upon my cabin just as wise as you came;' but seeing Mick a little frightened or so, she sez again, 'here's a creepy stool, *alanna*, sit down, sit down. Your father was a decent man, and you're that honest father's child, and it should be a hard day with ould *Shuaun* when she'd forget to the son the goodness of the father. Hold your tongue now—don't speak one word while you're within these walls, for there's them that would smell the sound of your voice here for a twelvemonth to come. When I had neither friend nor relation to help or shelter me, your father opened his door to the stranger. I got the bed in his corner, and a seat at his hearth stone—that door was never closed nor that fire never quenched on me—he put his roof above my head and gave me the first seed to put in the ground; and when I refuse to do a good turn for his child after him, though he's laid cold in his grave, may the seed never grow for me, and may the cabin for old *Shuaun* be the narrow house! Hush! I tell you. I know what you'd be for saying—Your wife—Hush! I say again, or I'll close my mouth for ever on the word. Your wife is nursing a son and heir for the King of the Fairies!' Mick stood up, opened his mouth, and looked round him like a man that felt the earth sinking from under him. 'Sit down, I say, and listen to me,' she sez again to him; 'mind what I tell you, and it's doing what may come against me, soon and sudden, I am, when I'm telling you or the like of you—may be it would cost me my life, and may be I'd escape—but no matter what way it turns, I shall turn good friends into bitter enemies. Yet for his sake, him that's gone, I'd venture more. Listen to me now, and do what I tell you. When your wife comes to your house to night, don't disturb her until she is going away; then leap out and lay hold on her, and don't let her go until she herself tells you what you must do to set her free, for she alone has the secret; if you let her go before that, you will never see her again—she will be lost for ever, and ruin and destruction will for ever pursue you and yours. There, now go—get up and quit my cabin—put up your money, I dare not touch it—go—go—tell no person your mind, and do as you are bid.'

"The next night Mick was lying awake when all were asleep. The sweet moonbeams stole in through the window, and shone about the house like the light from heaven, when about the same hour, the door opened, and poor *Maihri* walked in, like a spirit from the dead. She took up her child, washed it, nursed it, and put it to sleep on her bosom. 'Och! the poor thing,' sez Mick to himself, 'how pale she looks!' and he slyly stole one foot out of the bed, that he might be ready to jump and catch her. At the slight rustling, she started up and looked wildly about her, but Mick did not stir, and even held in his breathing; so she put the child into the cradle, and turned to look for something to eat. She was then walking out, quite heart-broken; when just as she came opposite to the

door of the little room, Mick sprung suddenly on her, and clasped her firmly in his arms. She screamed as if a sword was darted into her heart.

"'Is this you, *Maihri bawn astore ma chree*' (fair Mary, the darling of my heart)? sez he,—'and have I you once more?—and did you come back to me after all—back to your own desolate Mick?'—but she shrieked and struggled as if a serpent had twined itself about her.

"'Let me out—let me go,' sez she; 'Mick Mulryan, let me go,'—and she plunged away and screeched like a mad thing.

"'Never, never,' sez Mick, 'by the powers of man; I have you now, and I'll lose my life, or forty lives, if I had them, sooner than part you now.'

"'You must let me go,' she cried; 'you can't keep me—you don't know what you're doing—let me go—let me go!' and again she screamed and struggled; and what even surprised Mick himself at the time, was, that, during all the noise and disturbance, his mother or the child never awoke.

"'Shout and wrestle as long as you please,' sez Mick, growing quite stout, 'I'm determined you sha'n't leave me.'

"'Let me out, I desire you,' she cried again, 'it will be worse for yourself if you don't,—you cannot keep me, let me go.'

"'Why then, *duoul a cuish*' (devil a foot), sez Mick, 'nor the devil a hair I care whether it's for worse or better—I have you now, and keep you I will.'

"'Oh! Mick, Mick, you don't know what you're doing!' sez she, 'and it's destroying me out and out you are.'

"'It's destroyed you are already,' sez he, 'and it's myself that's destroyed, and your poor child that's destroyed, and its destroyed and ruined, every mother's soul of us is. Oh! *Maihri*, *Maihri*, have you any tenderness in your heart, or has the good nature and kindness left the world?'

"'All nonsense now, Mick,' sez she—'let me go, let me go.'

"'The red devil burn if I do,' sez Mick, 'there now.'

"'There's them that will soon make you, to your sore cost, Mick,' sez she; 'so for your own sake, and the sake of your child, let me go to my destination, Mick Mulryan.'

"'May shame and sorrow light on me first!' sez Mick; 'I'll die where I am, along with you. I don't care if all the fairies in the Forth of Ballinderry, and the seven counties to boot, were dancing round me on the floor this minute. Never will I part you until you first tell me what I am to do to restore you to your own house, your child, and your husband:' here the cock clapt his wings and crew three times.

"'Oh! what will become of me?' she cried. 'Oh! that's my own Mick, my own kind good Mick!' so she told him, and let him in to the whole secret of the way he was to take to recover her—then he let her go, and 'Whin' she past like a blast of winter's wind singing through a ruined wall, or sighing over a grave.

"As soon as the night fell dark, Mick Mulryan set off by himself to the Forth of Ballinderry. He walked round it three times, and then sat down on the left-hand side of the gap facing towards the west. There he collected a heap of stones; and there he re-

mained through the long hours in darkness, and exposed to the beating rain until the middle of the night, the hour when one day dies and the next is born. Suddenly the wind ceased to blow, and the rain swept off down the sky; and though there was no moon shining, yet the blackness had left the sky, and light white clouds played along the face of heaven. It was then that Mick heard music and merriment, and loud laughter inside the Forth, as if a thousand persons were enjoying themselves at a fair or a pattern, or some grand and great place of amusement. He listened; he could not tell what sort of instruments the musicians used, but he could plainly hear the patter of a great number of little feet, as if they were dancing. After some time the music stopped, and a great bustle followed, and in a few moments more a troop of horsemen wheeled round the Forth at full gallop, waving their swords about their heads as if they were going to cut each other into pieces. They were all shining over with silver and gold, and they dashed past him through the gap like a whirlwind. Then came a company of lords and ladies, dressed in silks and satins, and blazing with jewels and diamonds, followed by a great band of music all on horseback. These also swept out on the gap without once looking to where Mick stood, half screened by the heavy bough of a sycamore. Then came the king and queen, followed by another great company of lords and ladies, brighter and grander than those that went before. Mick watched them one by one as they passed, without saying one word, as he was bid, until, last of all, he saw his own Maihri seated on a white horse, and a haggard-wrinkled witch of a little child in her arms. Mick's heart was leaping in his breast. He fixed his eyes on her without winking; and as she rode up he saw her blue eyes glisten, and she smiled as she used to do, while his blood boiled through his veins. He leapt out, clasped his arms round her, and lifted her from her fairy side-saddle. 'Now you are mine, at any rate,' sez he; 'you are long enough keeping company with these decent people, and it's time to come home along with me.'

"At once there arose such a noise and an uproar all about him, that he thought the last day of the world was come before its time. The thunder roared above his head, the lightning flashed in his eyes, and the wind howled and raved as if it would tear up the big trees by the roots. Still Mick, though terribly startled (as well he might be), found his heart firm the more as he felt poor Maihri's beating against his side, and panting like a poor little frightened bird. Then the soldiers galloped up, with the king at their head. 'Shoot the villain through the head,' sez one.

'Hew the scoundrel into mincemeat for the scald crows,' sez another. 'Let forty of you ride over the rascal and trample him to death,' sez another. 'Throw a big tree on him,' sez the queen. 'Split his skull to the teeth,' sez the king; and one after another shouted above twenty different sorts of death for Mick. But he never minded the noise or the roaring; but clasping Maihri tighter, he turned his back on them, and began to throw the stones he had collected with his left hand over his right shoulder towards them. Soon he heard one fellow crying out, 'Murder, murder, I'm kilt!' 'My eye is knocked out; I'm blinded for ever,' sez another. 'My leg is broke; I'm a cripple,' sez another. 'Oh!' shouted the king, 'the ragamuffin has broke my back.' 'Then, by my royal crown,' sez the queen, 'your highness is now reduced to the rank of a lord.' 'Stop, stop, Mick Mulryan,' sez the general, 'what is it you want?—what brought you here?' 'I'll tell you what I want, ladies and gentlemen all,' sez Mick; 'I want but my own, and I have her now, and I'll die on the spot where I stand before I part her again—so in the name of God, his holy Mother, and the whole of the blessed Saints and Angels at their back, let me and mine alone, and we'll let you and yours alone, and that's a fair fool's bargain.'

"Well, then, a bargain let it be, Mick Mulryan,' sez the king of the fairies; 'you're a stout fellow Mick, and its not *you* we blame; take your wife and our good will along with her, we'll never disturb you or yours again, but those who prompted you to *this* will suffer for it. Lay our child down on the grass behind you, and go your ways.'

"Mary laid the child down softly, it was taken away, and the whole train swept along like a blast of the storm, and left Mick and his Maihri alone in the gap of the Forth. 'Come, come away, my own brave and kind Mick,' sez Maihri; 'come to our own home, now, I am yours, and you are mine for ever and ever, Amin!'

"The faithful Mick took his Maihri home, and long and happy were their days; their family was one of the finest and largest in the kingdom of Ireland. But *Shuain na mona!* it was a true word the king of the fairies said, Judith suffered for all, for she was found the next morning stiff stone dead in a bog-hole, though her head, people say, was above the water, her eyes open, and her long grey hair floating about. The crowner's *conquest* was held on her, too, and they gave it their *vardy* as accident; but there were people knew better than the crowner or men, and that was Mick and Maihri Mulryan, for they waked her comfortably, and buried her decent."